

## **DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

### **POINDEXTER SLOUGH FISHING ACCESS SITE HABITAT ENHANCEMENT**

#### **PART 1. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION**

1. **Type of Proposed State Action:** Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), in cooperation with the Beaverhead Chapter of Pheasants Forever (BCPF), is proposing to systematically modify upland habitat on a portion of Poindexter Slough Fishing Access Site (FAS). The modified habitat would provide enhanced nesting cover, winter cover, and food plots for the benefit of pheasants, waterfowl ,and other wildlife. Specific projects include: 1) the construction of approximately 0.8 miles of boundary fence, 2) the replacement of a small bridge to a tributary of the main slough, 3) the conversion of approximately 150 acres of old hayfields to dense nesting cover, 4) the interspersion of food plots throughout the project, and 5) the planting of a shelterbelt complex to enhance winter cover and food for upland game birds. Increased bird nesting on improved upland habitat would necessitate restrictions on dogs off leash within the project area from April 1 through September 1 annually.
2. **Agency Authority for the Proposed Action:** Montana FWP has the authority to protect, enhance and regulate wildlife use and habitat for public benefit (MCA 87-1-201). The Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP) has provisions for entering into agreements with individuals or organizations desiring to enhance habitat (ARM 12.9.701). Specific UGBHEP applications and project requirements are contained in ARM 12.9.701 & 12.9.702. The Parks Division has specific rules contained in MCA 23-1-110 that apply to development on fishing access sites. FAS development rules are further described in ARM 12.8.709. Constraint of animals (pets) is described in ARM 12.8.203.
3. **Name of project:** Poindexter Slough FAS Habitat Enhancement
4. **Name, Address and Phone Number of Project Sponsor:**

Beaverhead Chapter of Pheasants Forever  
P.O. Box 1383  
Dillon, MT 59725

406-683-8257

5. **Estimated Construction/Commencement Date:** September 2010

Estimated Completion Date: 2015

Current Status of Project Design: 25% Complete

6. **Location of Proposed Action:** 2 miles southwest of Dillon, Beaverhead County , Township 7 South, Range 9 West (Figure 1).

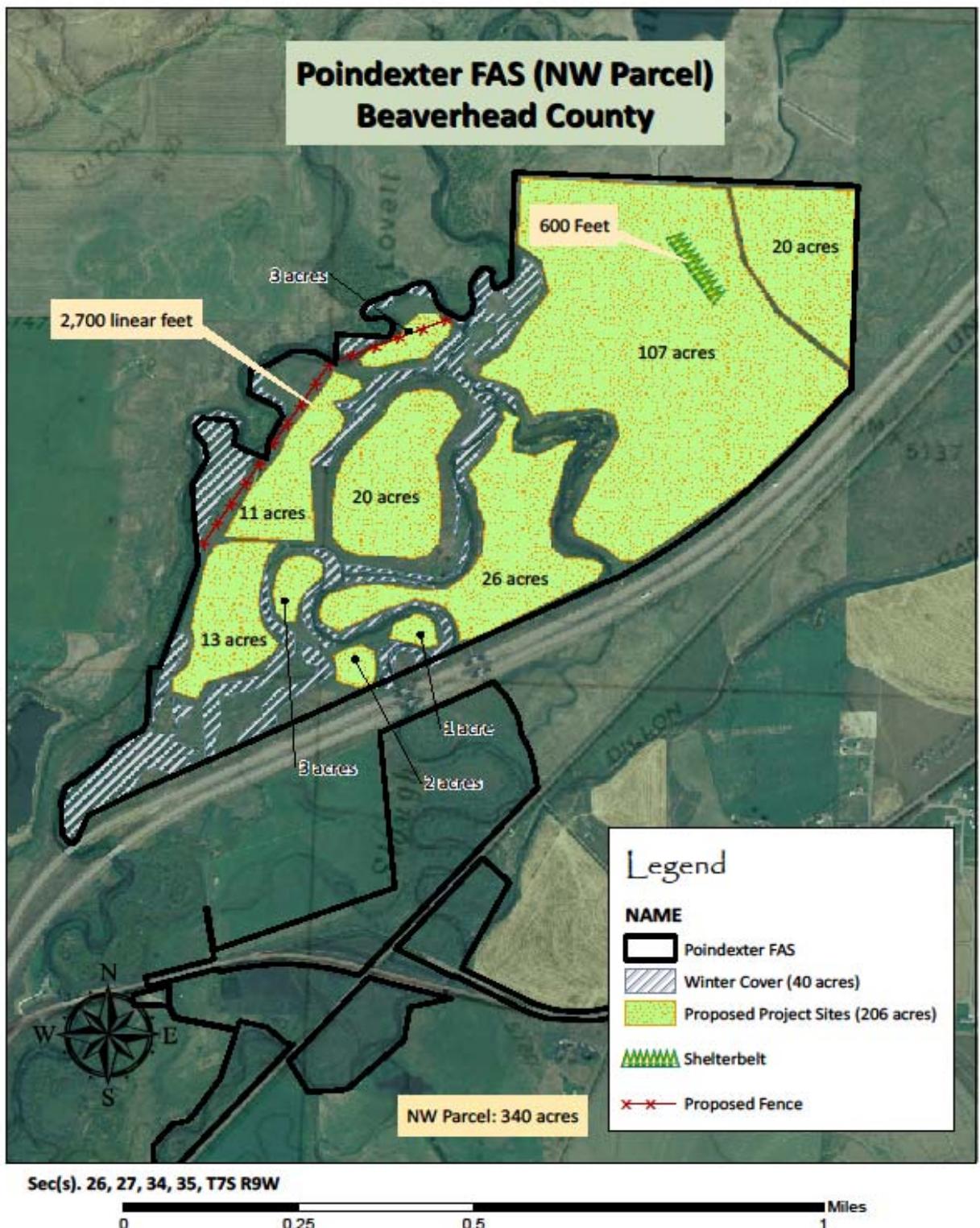


Figure 1. Poindexter FAS project map with approximate project locations and cover types.

7. **Project Size:** The project would occur within the 340 acre portion of Poindexter FAS north and west of Interstate 15. Approximately 40 acres or 12% of the area is considered winter cover and is

dominated by willow and one cottonwood gallery. These areas generally parallel the Beaverhead River and Poindexter Slough and would not be disturbed by the proposed action. Two ponds and associated wetlands occupy about 15 acres in the project area. Several patches of snowberry, a desirable shrub, occur on the property and would be retained as well. The balance of the project area, about 200 acres, is formerly irrigated hayfields comprised primarily of brome grass, native rushes and sedges, and other introduced grasses. Poindexter FAS has a high water table, and we estimate that 150 acres maximum would be suitable for dense nesting cover conversion and the rest would be managed for maximum cover through controlling livestock grazing.

**8. Permits, Funding and Jurisdiction.**

- a. **Permits:** Montana FWP must obtain a 124 Permit for the stream disturbance associated with the bridge replacement. The permit is pending.
  - b. **Funding:** The project would be funded by a combination of Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP), Pheasants Forever, and FWP Fishing Access Site and Fisheries operations dollars. Pheasants Forever may seek additional grant money to offset expenses.
  - c. **Other overlapping or additional jurisdictional responsibilities:** The Natural Resources Conservation Service will provide technical advice for the habitat enhancement.
- 9. Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:** The proposed action would 1) address long-standing boundary fence issues on Poindexter that have allowed cattle to trespass, 2) facilitate equipment access for fencing, habitat restoration, and the general public through the replacement of a small bridge and 3) create suitable nesting, foraging, and winter habitat for upland birds and waterfowl. Nesting and foraging cover would be created through plowing of old hayfields and seeding to either a grass/forb mixture or cereal grain for food plots. A shelterbelt is proposed for the northeast corner of the project where winter cover is limited. The project will benefit sportsmen, the wildlife watching public, and the economy of Beaverhead County through the various project activities and the enhanced recreational opportunity the project will create.

Poindexter FAS is a popular recreation destination. Angler days were estimated at an average of 1971 annually for the 1982 through 2005 period. The area also supports abundant waterfowl and white-tailed deer hunting opportunity.

**10. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives to the proposed action.**

**Alternative A-No Action:** This alternative is the status quo. No alteration of the habitat for the benefit of upland birds or waterfowl would occur under this alternative. The upland cover on the Poindexter FAS would remain nesting cover and food limited, and will not function as a significant production area for any of the species the proposed action would benefit. The fence and bridge project elements would become the sole responsibility of the Parks Division and the Fisheries Bureau.

**Alternative B-Comprehensive Habitat Improvement:** This alternative would apply habitat enhancements-nesting cover and food plots to the entire 408 acres of Poindexter FAS. The irrigation system and water rights would be fully utilized to enhance waterfowl production and maximize crop potential for the benefit of wildlife cover, food, and potential sharecropping.

This alternative is constrained by the FWP ownership patterns on the east side of Interstate 15, which are narrow and parallel to the undulating Poindexter Slough, making access and available acreage limited. Constant recreation use coupled with personnel limits and budget constraints further limit the utility of habitat enhancement on the east side and ultimately the rejection of this alternative. Cooperative agreements with adjoining landowners could result in some habitat improvements on the east side of the Interstate including two small parcels of Poindexter FAS. Such improvement would generally complement the proposed action but are outside the scope of this EA.

11. **List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:** Montana State Historic Preservation Office. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

## PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Evaluation of impact of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.
  - A. Physical Environment
    1. **Land Resources:** The project would require substantial farming over a 4- to 5-year period to renovate old hayfields to nesting cover, food plots, and a shelter belt. FWP anticipates farming about 30 to 40 acres per year and would likely conduct smaller test plots to establish seeding mixtures the first year. There is a chance that seeding could fail in any given year due to human error, unfavorable moisture patterns, or adverse climatic conditions. Seeding failure would not likely produce significant erosion on the flat terrain of Poindexter FAS where slopes run between 0 and 4%. Poindexter Slough and the Beaverhead River would be buffered by woody vegetation and grass cover which would be retained as winter cover, and there is little chance of any soil erosion reaching the slough or river. A seeding failure can be mitigated by planting in either the fall or by May 15 annually. A step-wise approach that allows additional acreage to be broken out only after previously farmed acreage is successfully seeded would also ensure soil is being protected.
    2. **Air Resources:** The project would expose soil and create some minor potential for refuge dust, particularly during periods of scarce precipitation and high winds. The proximity of tall trees and abundant willow along the undulating course of Poindexter Slough and tributaries, plus the position of the project in the valley bottom, should limit potential dust problems to rare events at best in the vast majority of the acreage. The potential for refuge dust can be further mitigated through farming only during periods when rapid seedling establishment is likely, as described above. There is no reasonable potential for objectionable odors, climate change, or pollutants to be created or released as a result of the proposed action.
    3. **Water Resources:** The proposed action would have no overall impact to the water resources of Poindexter FAS. Discharge into surface water or water quality changes (temperature, dissolved oxygen, or turbidity) are not anticipated. There would be no changes in drainage patterns. The rate and amount of surface runoff may have minor changes if fallow fields are employed. The impacts of this practice, which stores water in the soil, would be limited to the 6- to 12-month period the fields are fallow. No alteration, risk, or magnitude of floodwaters would be changed by the proposed action. No new water

bodies would be created under the proposed action. No impacts to the quality or quantity of groundwater are anticipated. The proposed shelterbelt would require periodic irrigation during the summer months; other cover and food plots established through the proposed action would not be irrigated. Existing water rights in the Trout Pond, located in the northeast corner of Poindexter FAS, would satisfy this demand. We do not anticipate any effects on other water users as a result of this irrigation and do not anticipate any surface or groundwater quantity issues that would affect other neighboring water users. The project would not result in any discharge that would affect either state or federal water quality regulations.

4. **Vegetation Resources:** The proposed action would alter the upland vegetation component of the project area. The area is currently comprised of wild and tame hayfields. Smooth brome (*Bromus inermus*) is the dominant grass species in the fields proposed for conversion, and while persistent and hard to kill, it has poor cover qualities for upland bird nesting and general cover requirements. The proposed action would replace these stands with suitable grass species like tall or slender wheatgrass (*Agropyron spp.*) and a 20% forb component such as Alsike clover, which is compatible with the soils and water table. These species have cover qualities that are more suitable for upland game bird nesting and generally remain more rigid and upright during the winter providing hiding cover that species like smooth brome do not due to the tendency to lay flat as snow accumulates. Food plots consisting of cereal grain and up to 1 acre in size would be interspersed within the nesting cover and within  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile of winter cover. The species of grain to be planted has not been determined; however, barley is generally discouraged in areas of high deer concentrations. A multi-acre shelterbelt is proposed for the northeast corner of the project. The shelterbelt would be comprised of native and introduced shrubs such as silver buffaloberry (*Sheperdia argentea*), common chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), golden currant (*Ribes aureum*), and Siberian peashrub (*Caragana arborescens*) plus deciduous trees such as golden willow (*Salix alba*) and white poplar (*Populus alba*). The shelterbelt would serve as winter cover and a food source for upland birds.

No unique, rare, threatened, or endangered plant species would be impacted by the proposed action. Ute ladies' tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*), a threatened plant species, occurs in the lower reached of the Big Hole River in eastern Beaverhead County but is not known to occur on Poindexter FAS.

The proposed action would not result in the reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land. The project area is owned by FWP and managed for fish and wildlife habitat, and public access. At this time, sharecropping or livestock grazing are not authorized. Going forward, sharecropping may be necessary to enhance or replace nesting cover as it ages and losses effectiveness, but these activities are beyond the scope of this environmental assessment.

Poindexter FAS is infested with the noxious weed houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) and has a few patches of spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*). Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) and whitetop (*Lepidium draba*) are both present in small areas and would likely require some management. Noxious weeds are sprayed under a contract with Beaverhead County and represent serious management issues that would continue to be addressed through all available tools and the FWP Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management

Plan (2008). The proposed habitat enhancements have the potential to increase invasive species like Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) which would require management if it becomes a problem.

The project would not affect wetlands or any prime or unique farmland. Two hundred two acres of the project are considered farmland of local importance. FWP and Pheasants Forever would consult with FWP and USDA NRCS scientists on any questions regarding wetland designations.

5. **Fish and Wildlife Resources:** The proposed action would enhance wildlife habitat on a significant portion of Poindexter FAS. Pheasants presently occur in low numbers in the area, primarily because it is food and nesting cover limited. By removing these limiting habitat factors, we anticipate a significant, huntable population to develop in the enhanced habitat created by this proposal. Other species including ducks, geese, and sandhill cranes as well as nongame species would benefit from the enhanced nesting cover and food plots associated with the proposal.

The addition of food plots and a forb component in the nesting cover would also benefit white-tailed deer, a sought-after species that is very abundant on adjacent private alfalfa hayfields. No significant barriers to wildlife migration or movement would be created by the proposed action. The proposed boundary fence would be a 3-wire barbwire fence with a bottom wire at 16 inches and a top wire at 42 inches to allow wildlife passage. The shelterbelt may require deer fencing of several acres to facilitate establishment. Fencing would still allow access for birds.

The proposed action would have no adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species. No threatened or endangered species occur on the project area.

Special hunting regulations that limit participation, take, or length of season are not contemplated as part of this environmental assessment. Should special regulation become necessary, they would be undertaken through the established FWP Commission season setting and rule making processes. Land use regulations that require dogs to be leashed within the project area from April 1 through September 1 annually are necessary to protect nesting birds, developing waterfowl, pheasant broods, and other wildlife.

#### B: Human Environment

6. **Noise/Electrical Effects:** The project would result in minor increases in noise levels on the Poindexter FAS from farming activity associated with habitat restoration. These types of noises are common in the rural community of Dillon, are occurring in a rural area adjacent to the interstate, and are not anticipated to be severe or nuisance levels. Gunshots associated with waterfowl and other hunting on Poindexter FAS can occasionally be heard in the town of Dillon. The frequency of gunshots may increase as a result of the proposed action and more concentrated hunting effort, but the level of noise is not anticipated to be severe or at nuisance levels. There is no chance of electrostatic or electromagnetic affects from this proposal. There would be no interference with radio or television reception or operation.

7. **Land Use:** The project would not result in any alteration or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use. Poindexter is owned by FWP and is managed for the benefit of fish and wildlife habitat and public access. Sharecropping and livestock grazing are both practices that have been employed in the past on Poindexter FAS as a way to manage vegetation. Neither practice is currently authorized on Poindexter FAS, and both are beyond the scope of this environmental assessment. The proposed action does not conflict with any designated natural area or area with unusual scientific or educational importance. The proposed action would restrict dogs to leashes on the area west of the Interstate from April 1 through September 1 annually in accordance with existing FAS rules (ARM 12.8.203). There would no adverse affects on or relocation of any residences as a result of this project.
8. **Risks/Health Hazards:** The project has a very low potential to create public risks and health hazards. Herbicides may be employed to control weeds, maintain the shelterbelt, and kill areas of high density smooth brome, a notoriously persistent grass species. All herbicide application would be carried out by licensed applicators in accordance with label directions and guidance from the Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan (2008) which directs how herbicides may be used on FWP property. The project would not affect any existing emergency response or evacuation plans nor would it require a new plan.
9. **Community Impacts:** The project would have no impact on the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the Dillon population. The project would not alter the social structure of Dillon. Economic activity associated with the project (contract farming, seed, lumber, fence materials) would create a positive impact on the local community. Similarly, enhanced recreational opportunity in the form of hunting and wildlife viewing would also create positive economic influences in the area. No changes to industrial or commercial activity are anticipated as a result of the project. No traffic hazards, effects on transportation facilities, or the flow of goods are anticipated.
10. **Public Services/Taxes/Utilities:** The project would not result in the need for increased government services. The project would not affect any local or state tax bases or revenue. No new utilities, distribution systems, or communication equipment would be required. The project would require a small gas-powered pump to periodically irrigate the proposed shelterbelt.

The project would be funded by a combination of funds from the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, Pheasants Forever, and FAS maintenance and capital programs. Up to \$25,000 per year may be committed to the project from the UGBHEP. Pheasants Forever contributions would depend on annual income and other priorities. Parks Division and Fisheries Bureau contributions are also dependent on income that is uncertain and in competition with other priorities. The Montana Youth Challenge may provide some labor for the bridge and fencing projects.
11. **Aesthetics/Recreation:** The fence component of the project would create an obstacle for fishermen accessing the Beaverhead River. Crossovers, gates, or turnstiles at strategic points along this 0.8 mile fence are necessary to mitigate the barrier the fence would create. The small bridge replacement would facilitate access for fence construction and habitat renovation but would also serve to aid recreational access. The addition of a shelterbelt

would alter the appearance of Poindexter FAS, but not in a manner that would affect any scenic vista or be aesthetically offensive. The project would serve to increase recreational opportunity on the area by adding habitat for pheasants, a popular game bird that are not abundant on publically accessible areas in much of southwest Montana. Habitat manipulation would also benefit species like white-tailed deer, waterfowl, and nongame wildlife which would be available for consumptive and viewing opportunity.

Poindexter FAS is a popular year-round dog walking destination. In consideration of the wildlife habitat that is being created, dog use rules must be enforced to protect nesting birds and other wildlife. The department proposes a rule following ARM 12.8.203(1) that requires all dogs be leashed from April 1 to September 15 annually within the project area north and west of Interstate 15. Conspicuous signs detailing this regulation would be posted at both trails entering the project area following the completion of the first major segment of habitat restoration.

The project would not affect any designated or proposed wild or scenic river, trails, or wilderness areas.

12. **Cultural/Historical Resources:** The project site would be subject to a cultural review before construction or habitat manipulation is undertaken. The cultural review would be conducted in several phases over the life of the project as projects are designed and implemented. Several facilities and structures including all irrigation infrastructure, a beaver slide, and corrals would not be disturbed by project activities. New sites identified in the review would be protected following the guidance of the review and the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). A letter of clearance from SHPO is required before work can commence.
13. **Summary Evaluation of Significance:** The proposed action has no impacts that are individually limited but cumulatively create a significant impact. The potential risks or adverse effects from the project are predictable and unlikely to create hazardous conditions in the physical or human environment. The project does not conflict with the substantive requirements of a local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard, or formal plan. The project does not establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts would be created. The proposed action may create some debate on land use, most notably the seasonal leash restriction on dogs and the absence of share cropping or livestock grazing as a vegetation management tool in the EA. FWP is a public agency and welcomes comment from all interested parties.

A Stream Protection Act (SPA 124) permit is necessary for replacement of the small bridge. A letter of clearance is necessary from the State Historic Preservation Office.

**Listing and evaluation of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:** The project would be completed through the joint efforts of FWP and Pheasants Forever. It is FWP's responsibility to ensure that all projects are done in accordance with the limitations, rules, and regulations set forth in this EA, State Law, and the MOU between the Beaverhead Chapter of Pheasants Forever and FWP.

### **PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT**

The proposed action represents a substantial change in the management of Poindexter FAS, a FWP property for 30 years. In decades past, pheasants have been released prior to the hunting season. This ‘put and take’ method of pheasant management failed to address the food and nesting cover limitations of the existing habitat. This proposal provides an opportunity to create ideal pheasant habitat for the enjoyment of the public and the benefit of a host of other wildlife species.

### **PART IV. EA CONCLUSION**

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? NO. If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.** The projects in the proposed action are common management practices that have no significant impact on either the physical or human environment. The practices are in line with the FWP mission to preserve, protect, and enhance wildlife resources for present and future generations. The net impacts of the proposed action would be positive for wildlife, sportsman, and the community of Dillon.
- 2. Describe the level of public involvement for this project, if any, and given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?** Public comment will be accepted on this proposal for 30 days. If requested, a public meeting will be scheduled during the comment period with notices in the *Dillon Tribune* and *Montana Standard*.
- 3. Duration of comment period:** Public comment on this proposal will be accepted from June 28 to July 28, 2010. Comments can be submitted in person, through the mail, or email to Craig Fager at the address below. Please indicate “Poindexter Comments” in the subject or address line.
- 4. Person responsible for preparing the EA:**

Craig Fager  
Wildlife Biologist  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
730 North Montana St.  
Dillon, MT 59725  
406-683-9305  
[cfager@mt.gov](mailto:cfager@mt.gov)

**APPENDIX A**  
**23-1-110 MCA**  
**PROJECT QUALIFICATION CHECKLIST**

**Date:** June 21, 2010

**Person Reviewing:** Craig Fager

**Project Location:** Poindexter Slough Fishing Access Site

**Description of Proposed Work:** FWP proposed to modify the upland habitat at the FAS to enhance upland game bird nesting cover, winter cover, and forage.

The following checklist is intended to be a guide for determining whether a proposed development or improvement is of enough significance to fall under 23-1-110 rules. (Please check  all that apply and comment as necessary.)

- .[]    A.    New roadway or trail built over undisturbed land?  
Comments: *None*
- .[]    B.    New building construction (buildings <100 sf and vault latrines exempt)?  
Comments: *None*
- [ ]    C.    Any excavation of 20 c.y. or greater?  
Comments: *None*
- [ ]    D.    New parking lots built over undisturbed land or expansion of existing lot that increases parking capacity by 25% or more?  
Comments: *None*
- .[]    E.    Any new shoreline alteration that exceeds a double wide boat ramp or handicapped fishing station?  
Comments: *None*
- .[]    F.    Any new construction into lakes, reservoirs, or streams?  
Comments: *None*
- .[]    G.    Any new construction in an area with National Registry quality cultural artifacts (as determined by State Historical Preservation Office)?  
Comments: *No*

- H. Any new above ground utility lines?  
Comments: *No*
- I. Any increase or decrease in campsites of 25% or more of an existing number of campsites?  
Comments: *No*
- J. Proposed project significantly changes the existing features or use pattern; including effects of a series of individual projects?  
Comments: *No use existing patterns will be impacted.*

If any of the above are checked, 23-1-110 MCA rules apply to this proposed work and should be documented on the MEPA/HB495 CHECKLIST. Refer to MEPA/HB495 Cross Reference Summary for further assistance.